

American

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President Obama Hosts Young African Leaders August 3–5

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington – President Obama is convening a first-ever, three-day conference in August with more than 100 young leaders from a cross section of African life to examine how they see Africa's future over the next half century, and to help craft innovative solutions to regional challenges.

"Together with American counterparts and U.S. government officials, the participants will share their insights on key themes of youth empowerment, good governance, and economic opportunity," White House press secretary Robert Gibbs said in a statement July 21.

The President's Forum with Young African Leaders will be held at the White House and State Department August 3–5, as well as at a variety of locations in the Washington area with American business leaders and nongovernmental organizations. Delegates are coming from 45 countries and represent an array of political, economic, cultural and social arenas in their African homes.

In his speech in Accra, Ghana, last year, Obama told African audiences of the need to advance entrepreneurship, education and the use of technology to help integrate Africa more fully into the global economy. Africa's share of world trade is less than 2 percent, and Africa's tremendous wealth in natural resources has not translated into greater prosperity for its people.

The Obama administration is dedicating significant resources to address some of these challenges. The \$3.5 billion food-security initiative called Feed the Future helps 12 African-focus countries in modernizing their farm sectors. And the United States is working with African partners to maximize economic development and trade through the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which is holding its annual meeting at the same time as the young leaders' forum.

"These steps are about more than growth numbers on a balance sheet. They're about whether a young person with an education can get a job that supports a family; a farmer can transfer their goods to market; an entrepreneur with a good idea can start a business," Obama said. "It's about the dignity of work; it's about the opportunity that must exist for Africans in the 21st century."

The United States has helped foster Africa's trading capacity through AGOA. U.S. imports and exports from

the 38 AGOA-eligible nations totaled \$104.52 billion in 2008, a 28 percent increase from the previous year. Complete trade figures for 2009 are being compiled, but give an indication of another good year, according to the U.S. Commerce Department.

But Obama also said in Accra that the future of Africa is up to Africans. "The U.S. government's role in [the young leaders' forum] is as a convener, encouraging networks between young American and African leaders, and pursuing lasting partnerships on behalf of our common security and prosperity," the White House said. "This dialogue and follow-up events in Africa will help the U.S. government better assess how to support Africa's own aspirations going forward."

More than 100 delegates will meet at the White House on the afternoon of August 3 for a town hall meeting with the president "to discuss their vision for transforming their societies over the next 50 years," Gibbs' statement said. The delegates will hear from Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and senior leaders at the State Department earlier on August 3.

The delegates are also scheduled to meet with under secretaries of state Judith McHale and Maria Otero on the future of Africa and how they will translate ideas into actions, the State Department said.

In Ghana, Obama told Africans that "in the 21st century, capable, reliable and transparent institutions are the key to success – strong parliaments; honest police forces; independent judges; an independent press; a vibrant private sector; a civil society. Those are the things that give life to democracy, because that is what matters in people's everyday lives."

This year 17 nations across sub-Saharan Africa are celebrating 50 years of independence. Since the early 1990s, democracy has made significant strides. Democratic elections have been held recently in South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Mauritius and Ghana, which illustrates the importance that Africans have placed on democracy and democratic values, the White House said.

U.S. Officials to Press Enforcement of Iran Sanctions

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington – Senior U.S. officials are traveling in August to East Asia, the Middle East and South America seeking compliance with obligations in the U.N. Security Council sanctions on Iran and North Korea over nuclear weapons development programs.

Robert Einhorn, the State Department's special adviser for nonproliferation and arms control, said during a recent congressional hearing that the goal now is to ensure that the most aggressive implementation of the sanctions is possible. "We're not alone; the European Union has acted strongly to follow up by endorsing a series of significant steps, as have Australia and Canada," Einhorn testified.

Einhorn and Daniel Glaser, deputy assistant Treasury secretary for terrorist financing and financial crimes, will travel to South Korea and Japan August 2-4 to hold talks with officials. They will travel later in August to China, and Stuart Levey of the Treasury Department will travel to the United Arab Emirates in coming weeks. Visits are also being scheduled for South America, they said.

Both testified July 29 before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on the impact sanctions are having on Iran. The sanctions have been imposed against Iran and North Korea to convince their regimes to abandon nuclear weapons development.

The United States embarked on a major diplomatic effort to engage with Iranian officials last year, a pledge President Obama had made during his campaign for president, Einhorn said. But those efforts have been rebuffed by Iranian officials and they have not demonstrated convincingly that their program is intended entirely for peaceful energy-generation purposes, he added.

"Iran's intransigents left the international community no choice but to employ a second tool of diplomacy, namely pressure," Einhorn said. "Our view is that sanctions are not an end in themselves. They're a vehicle for changing Iran's behavior."

The Security Council sanctions adopted in June provided a first step in the campaign to force Iran to halt uranium enrichment and development. "It bans transfers of major conventional weapon systems to Iran. It bans all Iranian activities related to ballistic missiles that could deliver a nuclear weapon," Einhorn said.

The sanctions also target directly the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is believed to be in control of Iran's nuclear weapons and long-range missile development programs, Einhorn said. These U.N. Security Council multilateral actions are supplemented by a number of important actions taken by the United States and others to increase pressure on Iran to halt its programs, he added.

"Our efforts have yielded significant results: At least \$50 billion to \$60 billion in oil and gas development deals have either been put on hold or have been discontinued in the last few years, due in part of our conversations with

companies about the threat of U.S. sanctions," Einhorn said.

"Our aim has been to use these tools of pressure to sharpen the choice that the Iranian government faces and to press it to negotiate seriously with the international community," he added.

Glaser said the objective over the next few months will be to broaden and deepen the existing sanctions framework. East Asia, the Middle East and South America are the three regions where most of the work toward enforcement of sanctions is needed, he told the committee.

"Recent actions have demonstrated that the international community is increasingly united in its efforts to apply financial pressure on Iran," Glaser said.

U.S. to Build First Continental-Scale Ecosystem Observing Network

Measurements over 30 years will help scientists understand climate change

By Cheryl Pellerin
Science Writer

Washington — For decades, scientists who study Earth's changing climate have gotten their data from global observing systems that monitor air, land or sea. Now, in the United States, the first continental-scale network simultaneously will monitor these and more than 500 other aspects of complex ecosystems, from weather to the genetics of living creatures.

The National Ecosystem Observation Network, called NEON, will be funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF) to generate and collect data across NEON's network. Data will be collected all day, every day, for the next 30 years.

"The essence of NEON is to observe changes and trends in the factors that influence living systems and in the living systems themselves," NEON Chief Executive Officer David Schimel told America.gov.

NEON products will be freely available online to anyone — scientists, officials, teachers, students and citizens worldwide — who wants to understand the impacts of climate change, land-use change and invasive species on ecology, the study of the relationship between organisms and their environments.

"We've been observing the environment for a long time, systematically in some sense since the turn of the last century. Within the U.S., we have hundreds of environmental observation programs," Schimel said.

Such programs, to inventory forests or survey breeding birds or track the weather, historically have been designed to answer one kind of question.

"One of the challenges for researchers and land-management agencies is that the observing systems were all designed around yesterday's questions," Schimel said. "Although they provide a lot of information, they really weren't designed to understand how living systems are going to respond in a world that doesn't look like the past."

TODAY'S QUESTIONS

Pending congressional approval of the NSF budget for 2011, construction of the new ground-based and airborne pieces of the network will begin in 2011 and will be largely complete by 2016.

To show how the causes and effects of ecological change are linked, NEON will collect data from 60 sites. Twenty of them will be core wild land sites — forests, grasslands, alpine tundra and others — where people don't interfere with the environment. Associated with each core site will be two intensively managed sites where there is much human activity. Agriculture would be paired with grassland, for example, or timber production with old-growth forest.

Of the 60 sites, Schimel said, 36 will have aquatic components like lakes or streams.

Through a series of workshops, the scientific community helped choose the sites, using data to classify the country into ecological regions that NEON calls ecoclimatic domains, each defined according to climate, topography, soils and vegetation.

"Many of the sites we're instrumenting have long research legacies," Schimel said. "Some are among the premier research sites in the whole country. Others are just places on private or federal land."

The Harvard Forest in Massachusetts has been a research site for nearly 100 years. A field site in Arizona, the Santa Rita Experimental Range, now operated by the University of Arizona, was established in 1903 as one of the U.S. Forest Service's first research sites.

NEON will also make measurements from the air.

"We're building three aircraft-borne systems that will collect unique data about living systems over much larger areas than we can measure on the ground," said Schimel, who was a senior terrestrial scientist at the U.S. National Center for Atmospheric Research for 16 years and a contributor to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate

Change's 2007 Fourth Assessment Report.

"One gives us a very detailed picture of how ecological systems, living systems, vary over days, seasons and years," he said, "The other gives us a snapshot of how they vary over regions."

Two aircraft will collect data over each site once a year during the spring and the third will be available for other studies.

"If they were built now, I'm sure [the third aircraft] would be in the Gulf because the technology we're using is ideal for observing not only oil on water — NASA's equivalent aircraft is there right now — but also for observing the impacts of disturbances like oil spills, hurricanes and wildfires," Schimel said. "We thought it was important to have one aircraft that was available to respond to events without having to imperil the long-term observing program."

PARTNERSHIPS

NEON has strong partnerships with most federal agencies involved in environmental issues and with dozens of universities that conduct environmental research.

"We've had conversations about how best to complement other programs with literally every federal agency that works in the environment," Schimel said.

"The Forest Service, the Agricultural Research Service, the U.S. Geological Survey, the Smithsonian Institution, NASA, NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] and EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]," he added, "because we're really all in this together."

Internationally, NEON will be useful because U.S. ecosystems are not unlike ecosystems in other regions and nations. The basic ecological science is relevant in many ways to a broad international audience, Schimel said.

"The information collected through the NEON program will be a resource for the whole global science community," he said.

Agriculture, Food Security Are Major Focus of AGOA 2010

Senior U.S. agriculture official previews ninth AGOA Forum
By Charles W. Corey
Staff Writer

Washington — Agriculture is closely linked to economic growth and development in sub-Saharan Africa, says Jim Miller, the under secretary for farm and foreign

agricultural services at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

In a July 29 interview with America.gov, Miller said USDA is coordinating with other federal agencies to improve U.S.-Africa trade under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), and increase food security, economic growth and development throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Miller spoke in advance of the United States–Sub-Saharan Africa Trade and Economic Cooperation Forum, better known as the AGOA Forum, which begins August 2 in Washington before moving to Kansas City, Missouri, August 4 to focus on agribusiness. The annual event has a civil society segment as well. Agriculture Secretary Thomas Vilsack is scheduled to address the forum, which this year is titled “AGOA at 10: New Strategies for a Changing World.”

The economies of sub-Saharan Africa depend on agriculture, Miller said. With a significant part of the population, including many women, engaged directly or indirectly in agricultural production and processing or marketing those products, farming is a key component of development.

Miller said the USDA has many initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa that range from emergency food aid to school-based feeding programs for children. USDA works with other U.S. agencies, including the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), as well as with national and local governments in Africa.

The private sector has an important role to play, Miller said. The United States works with African nations “to ensure that they are developing the appropriate partnerships with the private sector, both the private sector in the United States and in other countries around the world, but equally with the private sectors of their own countries.”

The USDA official said it is important to increase agricultural productivity in sub-Saharan Africa “in a way that, when coupled with trade, can provide a much better level of food security than these countries have experienced in the past.”

Increasing agricultural productivity includes helping the region build the appropriate infrastructure, both physical and social, to allow new food systems to function effectively and efficiently, he said.

Miller noted that the AGOA conference will put government officials from the United States and AGOA countries together with private-sector participants who can “help us begin to realize not only changes in

agricultural productivity and reductions in post-harvest loss, but improved processing and marketing opportunities through the development of effective institutions.”

In Kansas City, Miller said, AGOA ministers and delegates will be touring the Kansas City Board of Trade — which trades in wheat futures — to show how U.S. markets function and why transparency, stability and predictability are important for producers to help them improve agriculture in their countries.

“We think this is going to be a very interesting dialogue” in Kansas City, he said, both at the Board of Trade and in separate discussions with agricultural-finance experts and agricultural-production specialists.

Everyone will be working as well to find ways to develop systems for marketing and refrigeration to reduce losses and move perishable products to market with minimal spoilage, he said.

American Date Industry Readies Its Products for Ramadan

Farmers and distributors offer solutions for short supplies of fresh dates

By M. Scott Bortot
Staff Writer

Washington — In some years, Ramadan and nature are in harmony, and American Muslims can break their daily fasts with fresh, luscious dates.

This is not one of those years.

“It is kind of a struggle because there is nothing we can do about it,” said Mark Goulet, general manager of Shields Date Gardens in California. “Our yields will not change, so they have to have last year’s dates.”

Date harvesting season in America runs from about mid-August to mid-November, depending on the variety. With Ramadan this year starting around August 11, fresh dates will be absent from almost all Muslim Americans’ iftar tables.

Dates will be available in stores, but most will be old and not the best quality. That’s why Mohammed Abdul Aleem, chief executive and co-founder of online portal IslamiCity, advised his customers to make preparations.

“We’ve already sent out our first broadcast that if people want to order their dates in advance so that they can get it at the first of Ramadan, they need to order now,” Aleem said. “Last year we started educating our users by saying, ‘Look, if you want to buy dates, if you want to buy fresh

dates, you can buy them right now and freeze them.”

Online date retailers such as Aleem and date producers agree that freezing dates is the best way to guarantee near-fresh taste over long periods. When it comes time to use the dates, Aleem suggests covering them with a wet towel and placing them in an oven at a low temperature. This way, he says, the dates will retain their natural moisture.

American date farmers estimate they produce 30 million pounds of the crop annually. California grows about 95 percent of the country’s dates. The varieties grown in the United States originate mostly in Iraq, Algeria and Morocco.

The most popular date variety in America — for Muslims and non-Muslims alike — is the medjool. First transplanted to America from Morocco in the 1920s, medjool date palms thrive in California’s Coachella Valley and Bard Valley. Medjool dates are valued for their taste and thick, meaty flesh and firm body.

For this Ramadan, medjools will be hard to find. Aleem, though, has a supply he ordered for his customers through his source at Leja Farms in the Coachella Valley.

Greg Leja, sales executive of Leja Farms, said his operation stores, packs and sends medjools for Aleem’s customers. For Leja Farms to store an entire crop of medjools or other dates from last year’s harvest for Ramadan is not practical.

“It becomes an expense because you have to have storage space and hold the crop in freezing rooms,” Leja said. Rather than hold the harvest, Leja sells to the general market.

Leja and other date producers say date sales for Ramadan have generally been increasing, but now that Ramadan has slipped to the early side of the harvest, they expect sales to fall off. Only 5 percent of Leja Farms’ date sales will come from Ramadan this year.

“When Ramadan was back in November or even early December, my sales for it were about 25 percent,” Leja said. That timing is ideal for growers, packers and shippers because they can reduce long-term storage costs.

It is also great for consumers because dates are plentiful and fresh.

Even if the dates aren’t fresh, Muslims still need them to break the fast during Ramadan. For Abdul Mateen Chida, owner of Islamic supermarket Halalco in Virginia, selling dates during Ramadan is easy — when supplies are available.

“By the time we placed an order for the dates, our supplier, the main supplier [in California], he was out of them,” Chida said. “So we had to get it from here and there and from different sources.”

Although some California dates will be on Halalco’s shelves, Chida said they will share space with dates from Algeria and Tunisia. Customers, however, will be disappointed.

“The United States’ quality of dates is far superior to the other ones,” Chida said. “The medjool dates in America are superior to any other dates.”

Those who are disappointed by the dates they eat this Ramadan can prepare for next year: The fresh dates will be available on store shelves and online by the end of December, ready for freezing. Ramadan and the date harvest will be in harmony again in about 20 years.

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